

continued

American Optical Company Limited

pany's existence in the city.

Bob Lane, a 38-year-company veteran, recalls the transition from Coleman Street to Bridge Street West.

"The building was still in the middle of construction when, in 1948, we began moving the company equipment to the new location," recalled Lane. A year later the company completed its transition and began full operations from this site. At its peak, the employees at the Belleville plant numbered around 60, said Lane.

"The men worked on the grinding and polishing machines and the women worked on the inspection, the finishing etc."

At the time, American Optical was the largest company of its kind in the world with 10 plants in the United States, several in England and Europe and was still manufacturing glass lenses.

In Canada, the company had only two plants — the Belleville plant, which manufactured lenses, and the Quebec plant, which manufactured the frames.

Aside from the regular line of glasses, the company also made sunglasses and safety products, hardtop hats worn by construction workers, goggles, respirators, safety clothing that were shipped to many parts of the world. The two-storied Belleville plant had different divisions.

"We had a division for grinding and polishing, an emery department, inspection and that sort of thing till the lenses were ready to go out to the company branches that would cut the lenses to shape," said Lane.

The company had retail branches

across Canada and the one in Belleville, noted Lane, was located on Front Street, just north-west of Bridge Street.

The glass lens manufacturing operation of the company came to an end with the emergence of its plastic counterpart, noted Lane, and when in 1961 the company's headquarters was transferred from Toronto to Belleville, the manufacturing aspect of the company closed down. Instead, the plant became a warehouse for the company's products — lenses both glasses and plastic, frames, safety equipment, ophthalmic instruments and scientific instruments that were imported from the plants in the United States.

It appears, too, that the company not only changed its location a number of times but in its decades of operation, it also underwent a few name changes.

"In the early days of its operation in Belleville, it was known as Consolidated Optical and then it was changed to American Optical," said Lane. In 1969, the company's name was again changed to AOCO Ltd.

Lane retired from the company in 1985, a year before it closed down in 1986. The building was taken over by Northern Telecom (now Nortel) for its printed circuit board plant. When this plant closed in 1989, RexCan Circuits Inc. took over operations at the site until it was sold to a Markham company in 2003.

Contact Benzie Sangma at:
bsangma@cogeco.ca

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